

Starting Off on the Right Foot

by The Honorable John Patterson

It's basic military policy that troops new to battle should not only be well-trained, but also, where feasible, be committed gradually. If possible, their initial commitment should be in such a way that they'll be successful in their first engagements with missions well within their capabilities. In other words, starting off on the right foot in combat increases the likelihood of the unit's reaching its ultimate potential quickly.

Field Marshall Sir Harold Alexander issued such instructions to his troop commanders shortly after taking command of the Allied Forces in North Africa after the Battle of Kasserine. The wisdom of this policy is aptly demonstrated by what happened to the 17th Field Artillery Regiment (17th FA) in its first engagements in Tunisia, North Africa.

The Wrong Foot

The 17th had spent the interim between the two world wars as the School Artillery Regiment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It consisted of the Regimental Headquarters and two battalions, each with three gun batteries. Each battery was equipped with four 155-mm 1918 Schneider howitzers.

The Regiment arrived in Oran, French Morocco, on 6 December 1942, well after the completion of the Allied invasion of North Africa, known as Operation Torch. For the next few weeks, it trained intensively in the desert terrain of Morocco.

During this period, the battle lines were being drawn in Tunisia, 700 miles to the east. The Germans had begun occupying Tunisia almost simultaneously with the Allied landings in Algeria and Morocco, and as Operation Torch ended, the Allies began rushing troops to Tunisia. By 1 February 1943, the line in Tunisia had become fairly well established and ran north and south generally along the mountain ranges commonly

referred to as the Eastern and Western Dorsals.

The Allied troops consisted of three corps—the British V, the French XIX and the American II—under the command of the British First Army. The American II Corps occupied the southern end of the line with the Corps front extended over approximately 100 miles. The Corps and division units were not deployed as integral units but were split into small parcels, sometimes mixed and spread thinly over a wide area. Little effort had been made to prepare defensive positions even though German attacks were expected.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower visited the Corps sector on 13 February and expressed concern about the lack of preparation and the disposition of the troops. The Corps Headquarters was 60 miles behind the front in Tebessa and was largely out of touch with realities.

In the meantime, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's African Panzer Army, withdrawing before the British Eighth Army, had crossed the Libyan-Tunisian border and, on 1 February, was in a defensive position in the old French fortifications at Mareth. The stage was set for the final chapter of the War in North Africa.

The Battle of Kasserine

On 1 February, the 2d Battalion of the 17th FA (2-17 FA) was ordered to move from Morocco to Tunisia and, by 12 February, was in position in the Faïd Pass with the mission of supporting elements of the 1st Armored Division and the 168th Infantry Regiment of the 34th Infantry Division. Early on the morning of St. Valentine's Day, 14 February, the German 10th Panzer Division attacked the American forces in Faïd Pass without warning. (See Figure 1.)

The German armor, which included massive 60-ton Tiger tanks, rolled through the Pass, driving everything before it. The enemy tank attack was well-coordinated



with supporting artillery fire, strikes by Stuka dive-bombers and strafings by fighter aircraft.

Two American artillery battalions quickly were overrun and destroyed by the tanks. Two battalions of the 168th Infantry were left behind in the mountains. One of the artillery battalions overrun was the 2-17 FA—it was destroyed in its first engagement.

The Impact

The 2d Battalion lost 50 percent of its soldiers and officers, all of its guns and most of its equipment. The German attack on the Battalion was preceded by Stuka dive-bombings followed by an attack on its flanks by at least 60 German tanks. The 2d Battalion had been improperly deployed in the Faïd Pass and simply abandoned.

Early in the Tunisian Campaign, the Corps Commander had deployed his artillery incorrectly with isolated units scattered here and there. This piecemeal employment made it impossible to take advantage of the technique of massing fires that the American artillery, including the 17th FA, had been trained to use. Massing the fires of the many guns would have given the Allies a tremendous striking power.

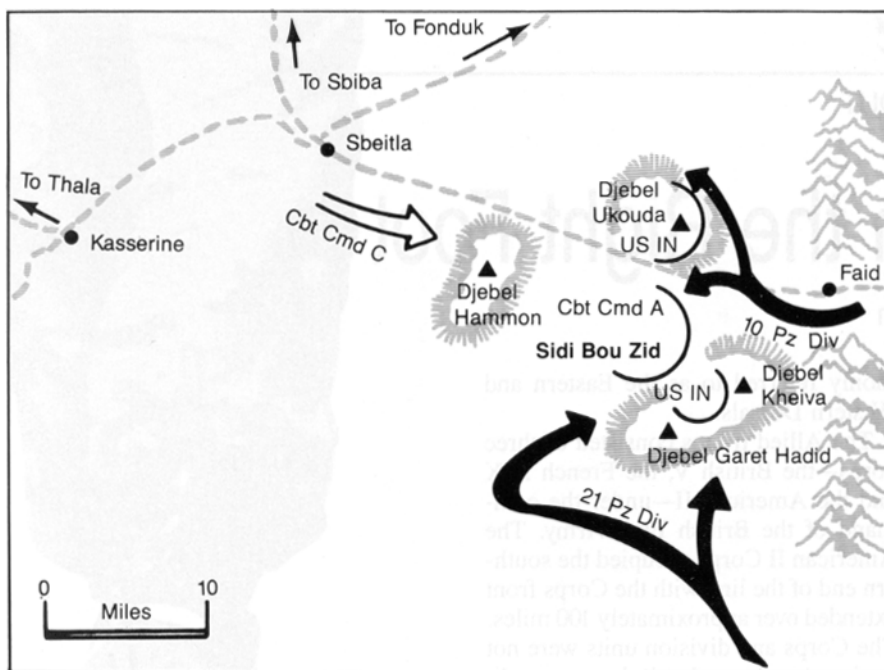


Figure 1: The Battle at Sidi Bou Zid, known as the Battle of Kasserine, 14 to 15 February 1943. The 2-17 FA near Faïd Pass was overrun early the first day. In the Battle, the Germans advanced more than 50 miles to seize Kasserine and Thala.

When the 2d Battalion's batteries were overrun, many of the soldiers scattered into the hills and eventually worked their way back to friendly lines. Many were captured and spent the remainder of the War in prison camps in Germany and Poland.

The 2d Battalion ultimately was refitted and rejoined the Regiment; however, it was a long time before it recovered from its harrowing experience. It had, unfortunately through no fault of its own, stepped off on the wrong foot and paid dearly for it.

Changing Feet

The Battle of Kasserine went on for another week while II Corps retreated more than 50 miles to the Western Dorsal, giving up Kasserine Pass and suffering additional losses. British and American units finally stopped the German drive. The 9th Infantry Division Artillery played a leading role in breaking up the German offensive by massing the fires of the entire Division Artillery.

When it was over, the Americans had severe losses. More than 3,000 Americans were killed and wounded in the Battle, and nearly 4,000 became prisoners of the Germans. More than 200 tanks were lost—in the Faïd Pass alone, Americans lost 44 tanks, 59 half-tracks and 26 artillery pieces.

After the Battle of Kasserine, the

piecemeal deployment mistake wasn't made again. Thereafter, the artillery was used as it was supposed to be. Battalions were concentrated and deployed in substantial numbers to be able to mass the fires of all available guns on any target. And the effect was devastating.

While the Battle of Kasserine was at its height, the Regimental Headquarters and the 1-17th FA, which were still in Morocco, received their marching orders. They began their march from Morocco on 21 February and arrived in the Thala area of Southern Tunisia five days later.

They came upon the survivors of their 2d Battalion in the Thala area and learned for the first time what had happened to them. The survivors of the 2d Battalion filled the soldiers of the 1st Battalion with stories of the invincible German Tiger tanks and the terror of Stuka attacks.

The Plan

On 6 March, General Eisenhower ordered General George S. Patton, Jr., to assume command of II Corps. Patton immediately began to revitalize the Corps with due regard for the costly lessons learned during the Battle of Kasserine. Time was short, for the Corps had less than two weeks to get ready for action again. From then on,

divisions were to live, train and fight as divisions. There would be no more withdrawals. Discipline would be strict.

The plan for the next phase of the fighting called for the Eighth Army to breach the Mareth Line on 17 March and seize the port city of Gabes. This was clearly to be the main show. The remainder of the Allied forces in Tunisia, which included II Corps, were to tie down the enemy forces in their sectors and, if possible, force the enemy to withdraw troops from the Mareth Line to protect their flanks and rear.

Field Marshall Alexander intentionally had given II Corps what he thought would be a limited role in this operation. It was in keeping with his idea that the Americans needed battle experience. They were to be committed in a limited way and in such a manner that there would be no repeat of Kasserine.

Accordingly, II Corps was given the mission of seizing the oasis of Gafsa and, if all went well, to demonstrate eastward along the Gafsa-Gabes Road. It also was ordered to move on Maknassy and instructed to avoid becoming heavily engaged. Patton resented this role and made his views known.

The Right Foot

On 17 March, simultaneously with the Eighth Army's attack at Mareth, Patton sent the 1st Armored Division toward Maknassy and the 1st Infantry Division toward Gafsa. The 1st Armored Division made good progress at first but ran into strong German resistance in the hills east of Maknassy and by 21 March, was halted.

The 1st Infantry Division with the Regimental Headquarters and the 1-17 FA attached, seized Gafsa on 17 March, which was lightly defended by Italian troops. The 1-17 FA, whose mission was to support and reinforce the fires of the 1st Division Artillery, fired its first combat mission at Gafsa, neutralizing an enemy artillery battery. The Division pushed ahead, seizing El Guettar on 21 March and occupying the ridges to the east after an early morning attack that netted 1,000 Italians and a few German prisoners.

As the Division continued its advance on 21 to 22 March, it came under frequent Stuka dive-bombing attacks. It was not uncommon to see from 25 to 30 Stukas overhead at one time. The 1-17 FA experienced its first Stuka attack and took casualties on 21 March as it

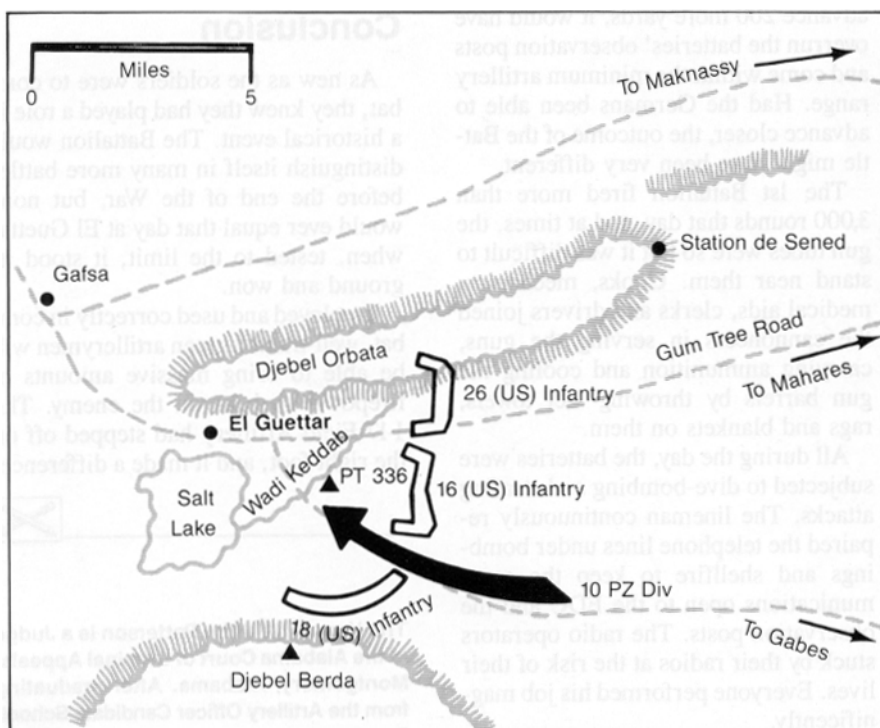


Figure 2: 10th Panzer Division's attack at El Guettar, 23 March 1943. The Germans seized Point 336 and almost reached the 1-17 FA behind the hills of the Wadi Keddab on the Gafsa-Gabes Road.

moved into position behind the ridges east of El Guettar.

The Battle of El Guettar

On the night of 22 March, the Division was deployed across the valley between two mountains, Djebel Orbata on the north and Djebel Berda on the south. To the east stretched the open plain to Gabes, and down the middle of the valley running east and west was the Gafsa-Gabes Road. (See Figure 2.)

The 26th Infantry was on the left with its left flank hinged on Djebel Orbata. The 16th Infantry was in the center occupying low ridges in the valley, and the 18th Infantry, reinforced by a battalion of rangers, was on the right with its right flank hinged on Djebel Berda and its left flank just south of the Gafsa-Gabes Road.

Word had been received that a German counterattack was imminent. It had been reported that the 10th Panzer Division was moving toward El Guettar. Forward observers began reporting tank noises approaching from the east. Indeed, the intelligence reports were accurate.

German Attack. The 10th Panzer Division launched its attack along the Gafsa-Gabes Road at 0300 on 23 March and by daylight, had passed between

the 16th and 18th Infantries and was fanning out to the rear. The 5th and 32d FA Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division were overrun.

These developments were reminiscent of the early phases of Kasserine. An observer recounted the Gafsa-Gabes scene: "The huge hollow square of tanks and self-propelled guns interspersed with carrier-borne infantry carried all before it."

The advancing German armor was engaged by the remaining artillery, some infantry and the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion. After losing more than 30 tanks in the wild melee that followed, the Germans withdrew to regroup.

Just before sundown, they came again. They were determined to break into the artillery positions. Their attack was preceded by heavy bombing and strafing of the American positions by Stukas, JU88 medium bombers and ME109 fighters. They concentrated particularly on the artillery and its fire direction centers. The air attack was immediately followed by an all-out frontal assault by German tanks and infantry.

The American artillery was ready, and the fire it brought down upon the advancing Germans was massive. Many

of the advancing tanks were destroyed or disabled, and the accurate time fire of the 1-17 FA, adjusted by Major Joseph R. Couch, burst just over the heads of the waves of advancing German infantry and cut them down like wheat falling before a sickle.

The time fire tore great gaps in the lines of the oncoming Germans. They closed the gaps and kept coming, but their ranks were thinning. Finally they faltered, and those left began falling back.

Darby's Rangers. The 1st Ranger Battalion was attached to the 1st Infantry Division and was heavily involved in the fighting, performing splendidly. On 23 March, it was at Djebel Berda, protecting the 18th Infantry Regiment's right flank. The 1st Ranger Battalion was commanded by the swashbuckling Colonel William O. Darby and was the famous Darby's Rangers.

Colonel Darby had a ringside view of the action and described it as follows:

From the heights in our segment, the Rangers looked down on a developing attack of Germans in parade-ground formation. . . . Excitement rippled through the American forces. . . . Every Ranger could see the Germans far below them on the plain, forming for attack. Six battalions—two each of tanks, infantry and artillery—of the 10th Panzer Division. . . . The German general, thinking to avenge the rather green American troops, gambled on a frontal attack.

The infantry leading was followed by some 60 tanks in what looked like an attack in the American Civil War. The Germans took no cover, seeming not to be aware of the almost certain deathtrap into which they were moving.

I was never so wildly excited as when watching this mass of men and vehicles inching toward us. The caterpillar-like force rolled irresistibly forward.

When the Germans were within 1,550 yards, the Yankee artillery boomed one salvo on top of another. The shells were concentrated dead on the enemy troops. Soon the eerie black smoke of the time shells showed that they were bursting above the heads of the Germans. Then a hole would appear in the oncoming carpet of the attack. There was no slowing up by the Germans, but their number was being hacked away by the artillery.

A few minutes later the remaining Germans charged the last hundred yards. There was no running, just a

relentless forward lurching of bodies. Sputtering gunfire kept up ceaselessly.

The Americans did not yield ground, and the attack was broken up. The Germans, still on their feet, retreated down the mountain while flecks of sand puffed up beside them.

End of the Battle. When night came, there was no respite. German Dornier bombers were overhead dropping flares and bombs, and word was passed that renewal of the German attack could be expected that night or early the next morning. Everyone was instructed to dig in and give no ground.

At first light the following morning, it became apparent the enemy had withdrawn. The Americans had won. They had stood, fought and defeated one of the enemy's finest divisions.

The Impact

The Germans had left the field littered with burned-out tanks and hundreds of dead. The American losses also had been heavy. The 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion had given a good account of itself but had paid a high price. After the Battle, it had only three command half-tracks left. However, the 601st as well as the 5th and 32d FA Battalions were refitted and back in action in a matter of days.

To the soldiers of the Regimental Headquarters and 1-17 FA, 23 March 1943 would be the most exciting day of their lives. The Battalion began to fire upon the advancing German tanks at first light and fired almost continuously until the final attack was broken up at sundown.

The German drive came within 1,000 yards of the 1st Battalion's batteries. If the German infantry had been able to

advance 200 more yards, it would have overrun the batteries' observation posts and come within the minimum artillery range. Had the Germans been able to advance closer, the outcome of the Battle might have been very different.

The 1st Battalion fired more than 3,000 rounds that day, and at times, the gun tubes were so hot it was difficult to stand near them. Cooks, mechanics, medical aids, clerks and drivers joined the cannoners in serving the guns, carrying ammunition and cooling the gun barrels by throwing wet towels, rags and blankets on them.

All during the day, the batteries were subjected to dive-bombing and strafing attacks. The linemen continuously repaired the telephone lines under bombings and shellfire to keep the communications open to the FDC and the observation posts. The radio operators stuck by their radios at the risk of their lives. Everyone performed his job magnificently.

When the climax of the Battle approached, the 1-17 FA began to run low on ammunition. The 17th Regimental Commander directed the ammunition trains of the 5th FA (overrun earlier in the day) into the 1st Battalion's positions, thus saving the day. Even with this additional supply, when the day was over, there were only six rounds left per gun.

On the following morning when it became known that the enemy had broken off the fight, a feeling of great elation spread through the 1st Battalion. Many of the soldiers and officers gathered at the FDC to congratulate each other and discuss the events of the previous day. The firing chart was signed by everyone present and kept as a memento.

Conclusion

As new as the soldiers were to combat, they knew they had played a role in a historical event. The Battalion would distinguish itself in many more battles before the end of the War, but none would ever equal that day at El Guettar when, tested to the limit, it stood its ground and won.

Employed and used correctly in combat, well-trained green artillerymen will be able to bring massive amounts of firepower to bear on the enemy. The 1-17 Field Artillery had stepped off on the right foot, and it made a difference.



The Honorable John Patterson is a Judge in the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, Montgomery, Alabama. After graduating from the Artillery Officer Candidate School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1942, he joined the 1st Battalion, 17th Field Artillery, in Morocco and remained with the Battalion until the end of World War II. In the Battalion, he served as a forward observer, the Battalion Survey Officer, Commander of Service and C Batteries and S2. At the Battle of El Guettar, he commanded the Battalion Anti-Tank Platoon, armed with six 37-mm anti-tank guns. In addition to North Africa, Judge Patterson served in Sicily, Italy, Southern France and Germany and was discharged in 1945 as a major. He was recalled and served two years with the 42d Field Artillery in the Korean War and in the Staff Judge Advocate Section of the 4th Infantry Division, Europe. Afterward, he served in the US Army Reserves and was discharged as a Lieutenant Colonel. Judge Patterson is a former Attorney General of Alabama (1955-1959) and Governor of Alabama (1959-1963).

Redleg Review

BOOK REVIEWS

Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War

Eliot Cohen and John Gooch. New York: MacMillan Free Press, 1990. 246 pages. \$22.95

At first glance, this book would seem to be just another in a long line of "military-bashing" exposes. Happily, the authors take an entirely different approach in explaining why things go wrong in war. Even their introductory question, "Why do competent military organizations fail?" begins with refreshing objectivity.

More correctly, as the authors continue, "True military misfortunes, as we define them, can never be justly laid at

the door of any one commander. They are failures of the organization, not of the individual."

The authors use a series of case studies to illustrate patterns of failure in organizations. Leaders of the 1942 American anti-submarine campaign in the Atlantic failed to learn and employ lessons from external sources. The 1915 British campaign at Gallipoli illustrates an organization's failure to take advantage of opportunities. Other historical vignettes are